

By Jordy Yager

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Dozens of lawmakers are getting a second dose of high school as they venture across the aisle and ask colleagues to sit with them for President Obama's State of the Union address next week.

In a petition circulated to members earlier this month, Sen. Mark Udall (D-Colo.) called on his colleagues to sit with a lawmaker of the opposing party as a way to heal Congress's increasingly divisive rhetoric, debates that in the public arena have at times erupted into hateful rhetoric and even violence.

The bipartisan gesture carries a serious tone for nearly all who have pledged to do away with the typical seating arrangement, which is not assigned but generally gets divided by party. But the humor of asking one of their fellow lawmakers to attend the event as their "date" has not escaped members.

"It's a little like prom," joked one Democrat, who asked not to be identified. "You just hope they don't turn you down."

As of this weekend, nearly 60 lawmakers had pledged to sit with a member of the opposite party, according to Udall's office. In a letter sent to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio), and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), the lawmakers said that the bipartisan seating arrangement would remind members of their common commitment to serve the American people.

"Beyond custom, there is no rule or reason that on this night we should emphasize divided government, separated by party, instead of being seen as united as a country," the letter reads. "Perhaps, by sitting with each other for one night, we will begin to rekindle that common spark that brought us here from 50 states and widely diverging backgrounds to serve the public good."

Nearly two dozen lawmakers have already announced who they plan to sit with during the address next Tuesday, according to an analysis done by The Hill, with some others saying they will wait until the day of the speech to track down a member of the opposite party.

House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) plans to sit next to House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) after endorsing the idea last week. Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) is planning to sit with Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.). And Sen. Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) plans to sit with Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.).

Many of the seating buddies seem to find their match through work that they do on committees together or by being part of the same state delegation, such as Reps. Shelley Berkley (D-Nev.), Joe Heck (R-Nev.) and Dean Heller (R-Nev.).

On Wednesday, after Republicans voted to repeal the healthcare measure that Democrats passed last year, Berkley asked Heck, who is a freshman, if he wanted to sit with her and Heller for the address. Berkley said she'd be happy to sit with them on the "Republican" side of the House, but she was concerned about making sure the seat was reserved because it's first-come, first-serve, said Heck's spokesman, Darren Littell.

"They both looked at [Heck] and said, 'Well, someone's going to have to get down there 2 hours early to get the seats,'" said Littell.

"And Joe [Heck] looked back at them and said, 'That means me, doesn't it?'"

In what some are calling a right-of-passage, several freshman lawmakers seem to be getting tasked with reserving the seats. Of course, that's up for grabs in the case of freshman Rep. John Carney (D-Del.) who is planning to sit next to freshman Rep. Patrick Meehan (R-Pa.). Carney and Meehan did an event at a Boeing facility last year when they were congressmen-elect and Meehan's Pennsylvania district borders Carney's in Delaware, so they expect to be working together in the future, according to Carney's spokesman.

Rep. Lois Capps (D-Calif.) approached Rep. Sue Myrick (R-N.C.), one of the first Republican members to sign onto the letter, on the House floor on Tuesday, thinking that because of their work together on the House Energy and Commerce Committee and the Cancer Caucus, they would make an excellent seating pair. Myrick agreed.

The night may be somewhat uncomfortable as the president's party typically stands and applauds his words more often than the opposing party, which has been known to remain seated. During some joint sessions of Congress, some in the opposing party have booed or shouted at the president, as Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) did during President Barack Obama's speech on healthcare in 2009.

But levity may be had, at least in one section of the House. Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-Maine) is planning to sit with her fellow members of the Congressional Women's Softball Team, such as Republican Reps. Shelley Moore-Capito (W.V.), Jean Schmidt (Ohio) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Fla.).

Other members who have announced plans to sit together are as follows:

Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) plans to sit with Sens. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) and Mark Pryor (D-Ark.).

Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) plans to sit with Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine).

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) plans to sit with Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.).

Sen. Kay Hagan (D-N.C.) plans to sit with Rep. Renee Elmers (R-N.C.).

Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.) is sitting next to Sen. Pat Toomey (R-Pa.).

Rep. Phil Gingrey (R-Ga.) plans to sit with Rep. Gene Green (D-Texas).

Rep. Mike Ross (D-Ark.) plans to sit with Rep. Steve Womack (R-Ark.).

Del. Madeleine Bordallo (D-Guam) plans to sit next to Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.).

Rep. Larry Kissell (D-N.C.) plans to sit next to Reps. Chris Gibson (R-N.Y.) and Howard Coble (R-N.C.). Rep. Mel Watt (D-N.C.) plans to sit on the other side of Coble.

Rep. Charles Bass (R-N.H.) plans to sit next to Rep. Jay Inslee (D-Wash.).

Rep. Mike McIntyre (D-N.C.) plans to sit with Rep. Robert Aderholt (R-Ala.).

Rep. Daniel Lipinski (D-Ill.) plans to sit with Rep. Robert Dold (R-Ill.).

Rep. Sanford Bishop's (D-Ga.) office said he doesn't know who he'll sit next to, but he does support the bipartisan move.

Sen. John McCain's (R-Ariz.) office said that he has not announced who he will sit next to yet.